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Food consumption and dietary behaviour of children from the Traveller community: data from the 2006 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey

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The Travelling community are an indigenous ethnic group of Irish people with a distinct culture and history of nomadism. Travellers differ from the general population in many aspects, including their lifestyle, culture and treatment by society⁽¹⁾. Based on the most recent census (2006) it is estimated there are 22 435 Travellers in Ireland, of these, 50.8% (11 398) are aged ≤18 years⁽²⁾. The health status of Travellers is poor in comparison with the general population⁽³⁾, but there is little information about Travellers' dietary habits. Furthermore, there appear to be no published studies investigating the diet of Traveller children in Ireland. Thus, data from the 2006 Irish HBSC Survey were employed to investigate reported food behaviour of school-going Traveller children.

The overall aim of the HBSC survey is to gain insight into and improve the understanding of the health behaviour and well-being of children and adolescents. HBSC is a school-based survey with data collected through self-completion questionnaires administered in the classroom. HBSC Ireland collected data in 2006 from children aged 9–18 years in primary and post-primary schools (*n* 10 334). Ethical approval was granted for the study and consent was obtained from schools, parents and children.

Children who reported they were a member of the Travelling community (*n* 233) were matched with children from the general HBSC sample according to age, gender and socio-economic status. Where possible children were matched within the same classroom and thereafter within the same school. Diet and related lifestyle variables were analysed and compared using χ^2 tests.

% who report consuming....	Fruit >once daily	Vegetables >once daily	Sweets ≥daily	Soft drinks ≥daily	Crisps ≥daily	Chips ≥daily	Diet soft drinks
Travellers	22.3	18.3	43.3	34.1*	25.3**	17.3**	21.2**
Matched group	17.6	20.4	34.7	25.5	15.4	7.5	11.0

Values were significantly different from those for the matched group: **P* ≤ 0.05, ***P* < 0.01.

	% who report never having:			% who report	
	Breakfast on weekdays	Breakfast with mother and/or father	Evening meal with mother and/or father	Dieting	Food poverty
Travellers	21.3**	42.2*	25.0	14.5*	27.5*
Matched group	11.7	31.5	18.8	7.9	19.0

Values were significantly different from those for the matched group: **P* < 0.05, ***P* < 0.01.

Results from the survey indicate that fruit and vegetable intake is comparable between groups but that Traveller children are more likely to report consumption of soft drinks, crisps and chips compared with non-Travellers. The differences in dieting and not eating breakfast were more apparent among Traveller girls. It is anticipated that the All Ireland Traveller Health Study, which was initiated in 2007 will add to the emerging evidence base on Travellers' diets.

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1. Department of Health and Children (2002) *Traveller Health A National Strategy*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
2. Central Statistics Office (2006) Ethnic or cultural background (including the Irish Traveller community). Vol. 5. http://www.cso.ie/census/Census2006_Volume5.htm
3. Barry J, Herity B & Solan J (1987) *The Travellers' Health Status Study. Vital Statistics of Travelling People*. Dublin: Health Research Board.